

Lotta Future Dudes

By Nico Earhart

I remember Billy saying something to me along the lines of “I think I need to sit down,” but can’t recall with a hundred percent certainty. By now the music had started, the lights of various colors and shapes darting around the room, illuminating bodies that danced around the venue in heavy clusters that flowed to the ceiling like a vale. We had decided to set-up close to the stage, getting as near the front as we could, but still removed from a rail that divided the sea of humans from security guards who stood motionless, statuesque arms folded around their haunches. With the music going full-bore as it was, the projected lights working rotations around the crowd, I couldn’t decipher what he had murmured to me. A brief moment had passed since he had spoken when I felt his palm, clammy and chilled through my shirt, grasping my shoulder like a frail claw. Then, the brief grasp weakened and began to pull away completely as I sensed the lone streak of a faintly pressed fingertip navigate the length of my shoulder. It pulled away subtly as it moved and becoming softer, rolling, until at last the lightest touch could be felt as the finger clipped the topmost hinge of my leather belt.

Turning around to see what had caused this effervescent touch, I saw Billy was now sprawled out on the wet floor in an intertwined bundle of curly blond hair and flannel. There had been little room on this thronged dance floor for anything other than standing in place, so when he had come crashing down, falling onto legs and shins as he folded, there was a strangely brewed commotion in the pack. I twisted, seeing this drooping object horizontally meshed into the ground, his eyes open but not rolled to the back of his skull as was common in this state of unconsciousness. The eyes looked dead ahead like he had seen a ghost. I dipped below the

canopy of limbs and pulled my face close to his, making a quick assessment of the situation in which we now found ourselves.

“YOUR FRIEND IS FUCKED UP MAN...” a stranger barked into my ear over the music as bits of spittle and beer sprayed the side of my head.

I passed a disparaging look to the man who I’d been speaking with before Billy went down in the darkness like a lump of coal.

“You don’t fucking say.” I spoke but the sound and the lights had eaten up the words as they left my mouth.

A half day earlier we had been passing from the granite streaked plateaus of the Los Padres Mountains. Through the scorched alpine desert rising away from the sea to the north of Los Angeles and descending through the fire scarred Grapevine with its patches of blown ash, following I-5 into the Central Valley. We had left LA after nine, aiming to cut our way through the state and into San Francisco by the early afternoon. We pressed northward throughout the day, past Bakersfield and Fresno, the metallically latticed utility poles guiding our way as they spread to the horizon and slipped horizontally into the mirage like Dali paintings. They ran to the edge of the Earth’s curve and out of sight, up the enormous curve of the great valley. We passed the unceasing farms and their checker patterns of vegetation standing out against the parched background of the empty pan. The sand eventually rose to the heights of the southern Sierras in the east as a jagged razor’s edge of ancient stone. Signs littered the fences to side of the highway across the no man’s land of dead grass and garbage – IS USING WATER FOR FOOD A WASTE OF WATER? Past the pestilent, acrid-smelling cattle farms and roadside Fruit and Nut stands that littered the exits.

We had embarked on this four-hundred-mile drive to dive into the dense air of the San Francisco bay where we would be staying for three nights of concerts at the Bill Graham Auditorium. We would be in the city three nights for the three shows, then make our way back down the state returning to LA for another show at the Forum. After resting one night we would wake up early and continue further south for the last of the shows in Chula Vista, a border town east of San Diego. But that would be six days from now and there was still plenty of road in front of us and miles to tick away. Barring any major setbacks in the plan we would wake up six days from now and then it would be over. Another West Coast swing in the books.

As is common with a well-composed travel plan, certain hurtles must be taken into account: unplanned and unexpected events that can be calculated and prepared for, but can only be reacted to once they have unfolded. However, I hadn't expected that the first of these unplanned events would materialize itself so early in the trip. Now, standing over Billy splayed out on the ground with his curly blonde hair being trampled and ground onto the beer-soaked floor, we had reached an abrupt impasse.

I acted quickly although there was little to be done for him in that ethereal moment as he faded into the darkness of the ground. Pulling up his head by its mangy crown, the thousand-yard-stare eyes still beaming dead on, I shook his limp body to emancipate him from this catatonic encasement in which it was held. It took a moment of cajoling and a deliberately but well-intentioned slap to the side of his face before he vaguely returned to consciousness. A few blinks of his eyes as they shifted from their fixed gaze and slid sluggishly around the room. He spoke briefly in a confused and monotonous tone, asking what had happened and how he had ended up on the ground. People's shins, feet, rang and cycled against his back like pistons.

“I’ll tell you later, Bill. We need to get off this fucking floor right now.”

Within seconds he was back to his feet, although dazed like a fighter who had been caught on the chin. But I could see now that he understood. The need to abscond from this dingy and miserable place. We rose together as strange looks I didn’t care about met mine and I pulled him up to the prone position. We had begun to walk but in a fleeting attempt to move to the exit we had only traveled a short distance when trouble returned. Soon I could see the darkness washing over Billy again, his arms jutting out like wobbly tentacles grasping for something to embrace. But there was no stability to be had. He slumped back to the floor in slow motion, his eyes rotating again to their catatonic gape. He spilled onto the floor for the second time, in the process rolling back onto appendages as their owners looked to me in the confusion and drug-blurred misunderstanding.

Knowing the only feasible way to get Billy off the floor was through my own sheer willpower, I stepped over to the far side of his lifeless arms till they lay sprawled near my feet. Grabbing one of his outstretched arms and hauling him up to the level of the crowd, I rolled one of his arms over my body like a GI picking up a fallen comrade from the muck and heaved the dead weight onto my shoulders. Having finally reached a position where I could drag him towards the exit, his feet dangling along the ground and scrapping the tops of his shoes through the filth as he slid, we made our way deliberately through the enchanted crowd to the bright crimson ‘exit’ sign that burned in the corner of the room. As I heaved, those who observed the scene finally parted to let us through seeing my dire look of necessity and the gumption in my eyes. After a few minutes, although the expanse of time seemed to have taken much longer than that retrospectively, we finally made it to the edge of the twilit room, away from the hordes of

dancing hippies happily in the throes of their acid trips, to where I was able to lay him down in a quiet and unoccupied passage.

It took minutes of cajoling to finally get a passerby to express my concern to one of the security guard who lined the front bannister of the stage. Billy had again been overtaken by one of his mysterious blackouts and was pasted against the black wall, covering a scattered collection of sweaters on the ground below him, till the medics finally responded and took over the ordeal. By the time the three workers had huddled over him he had emerged from unconsciousness again and was talking to the group in a humbled voice that we could barely hear over the booming sound of the group that played on stage. They asked him a few questions: Where are you? What year is it? Who is the president? Which band did you come to see tonight? All of those trivial questions that seemed comic but if answered incorrectly could signify serious damage to the brain. He had passed the tests and would not require the wheel chair that had been summoned to our position in that poorly lit corner of the room, though I was not convinced myself of this revival he was trying to vend to the medics. After a few touch-and-go moments, hesitant to render control of him again from the professionals, I gave them the go-ahead to leave us and he dragged himself off the floor and stood erect for the first time in ten minutes.

We spent the rest of the show in the cavernous, upper-reaches of the venue, not wanting to invite another incident that could spelled disaster, certainly for those of us who were still interested in seeing the remainder. We had one more scare, during the second set when the body heat had filled the heights of the venue like a hot air balloon. It came and went peacefully, without incident, although I could see buckets of sweat pooling down from the top of his blonde shag of hair. With views obstructed by one of the Romanesque pillars that secured the roof of

the building, we passed the remained of the show unable to see the band on stage with their syncopations, but we could hear the music and that was all that had mattered at the time.

The next two days passed without incident. None of the excitement of Billy's passing out but decidedly more enjoyable with its absence. We had booked a hotel near the Civic Center, the ridiculous hive of activity in the mid-Market section of the city. Walking out of the lobby each morning we were greeted by freaks and other concert goers still arriving from the previous night as I took my morning coffee and cigarettes out on the litter-strewn street. No matter how many opulent companies move into San Francisco, with their high-paying jobs and associated claims of economic development, Market Street remains a cesspool, filled with drug hawkers and transvestites, homeless who had been kicked out of every other decent corner of the city. But it was a five-minute walk from the theater and came equipped with a bed and toilet, which were our main requirements for the week, so I dismissed the calamity.

We had managed to make our way out of the city center on the second day, heading to the Panhandle for a stop at a Mexican restaurant I had been intent on visiting. They had legitimately authentic Oaxacan food, something that comes in handy when you need an abundance of greasy meats and cheese. Eating our plump quesadillas and spiced garbanzo beans, silent in our mutual attempts to piece together what had happened the previous night, the muted luncheon was finally undone with a voice.

"You know what I think it was..." Billy spoke out of the silence that had only been broken by the waiter's continual check-ups.

"I got a street taco before the show. While you were still up in the room. I think... What they must have done was cook some shellfish on the flat top before and then cooked my chicken on top of that. I think that's probably why I passed out," he concluded.

I had a different theory.

“You don’t think it was all the weed and the beer and the mushrooms and that shit?” I asked in a tone implying it was a rhetorical question.

After lunch we decided to walk our way over the hill from the Panhandle, back down Oak street, crossing Divisadero, Octavia and Van Ness as we made our way towards the financial district. The sun beat down on our jackets but was offset by the wisps of fog that blew in intermittently from the sea. It was just the salubrious jaunt that we needed to kick our brains back online. The blood circulating through our veins and mixing with the Mexican food, sweeping some of the cobwebs that had formed in our skulls the night before, especially given the number of times that Billy had cracked his head.

By the time we had finished walking through the pastel-colored valleys of houses and dodgy bodegas of the city, the hub-bub of the concert had already reformed on the steps of City Hall. Phish fans and homeless were strewn about the soggy grass in small groups slung low to the ground, the two virtually indistinguishable. Some of the people had already started walking through the plaza with a single digit raised above their heads – the universal sign that they were still in need of a free ticket to tonight’s show from a generous onlooker – needing a miracle. People dozed in the grass with chilled bottles of California beer in their hands, smoking odorous joints whose smolder blew into the air and was wafted away by the wind. The hissing and unmistakably pulmonary hum of the nitrous vendors occasionally pierced the hushed murmur of the crowd with the high pitch whine of gas escaping from the stubby tanks. This was one of the only violations the police, how had until now turned a blind eye to the calamity, seemed to notice. Something about the abundance of money to be made from them in a quick succession of balloon sales, like a feeding frenzy descending on a kill before loping away as the meat was

exhausted. At one point I overheard an officer, armored in black garb and intimidating in his knee-high jodhpurs and helmet, speak to one of the men holding a nitrous filled balloon, walking away from that unmistakable hiss and surrounding crowd.

“You know it’s a felony to possess nitrous oxide on federal property, right? I could take you to jail right now if I wanted to,” the robotic policeman explained to the burn-out who had just inhaled a large dose of the gas.

“Umm, this is for my nephew’s birthday party later on. It’s a party favor.” He replied to the cop as I took note of his clever response.

The officer, letting out an audible sigh as he looked down to the man’s feet and the ground scattered with the remnants of shriveled balloons, shook his head and rode away on the branded SFPD dirt bike.

By the last night of the San Francisco run we had added a third member to our group: Alan, a man I had lived with in Spain a decade before, had driven down from Sacramento and would be meeting us at our hotel before we all headed out for the last show. He had explained to Billy on the phone that he would only be coming down for one night, having just found out that his wife was pregnant with their first child. He would be sleeping on an inflatable mattress in our hotel that night before heading home the next morning.

Once Alan had arrived we scrapped ourselves from the hotel beds, like petrified gum, still exhausted from the two previous shows. We headed down to the lobby, still filled with the dreadlocked and patchouli-smelling class associated with the Vermont band, greeted him in the entrance to the parking structure, and made out way out onto the street heading in the direction of the Mid-Market.

Market street was once again alive with the insane and decrepit. Young men called out to us, offering bags of grass even though there were numerous dispensaries in the neighborhood where people could buy the stuff without the fear of being mugged crews of shifty men. It was best to keep a steady pace on this road. Head down, shadowed against the wind that whipped between the high buildings, making as little eye contact with the hoards stationed upon the street. Not that it was an overly dangerous place in the middle of a weekday afternoon in the fog-touched daylight, but there was no point in inviting attention to yourself if it was not necessary. We ambled down the road admiring the scene that had been supplemented with the addition of seven thousand Phish freaks (ourselves included, of course) who had come to see the shows. There is something strange about walking around a city where the band is playing and being able to tell immediately which of the strangers you pass would be headed to the show. Maybe it's the hollow glare they possess from the remnants of hallucinogenic drugs, occasionally a shirt with the band's name will be worn, but it seems like you can always tell who else on the street will be making their way to the show with you later that night.

The three of us stopped into a quiet food court on an ambiguous section of Market that seemed to have two of the main things we needed to power through the remaining show: food and caffeine. Many people have expressed concern over the amount of drugs people take for a series of these concerts. That some of them might not even be able to comprehend the music, their brains constantly awash with chemicals. But for me, the most crucial part of seeing a band play five concerts in six nights (with the addition of eight-hundred miles of driving) is the caffeine. It's the first thing that I look for when I get up on these strange, amalgamated mornings, and the stuff will course through my veins for the remainder of the day. On this day, I believe I drained seven cups. But, food is also another crucial component. If you try and party

through your hunger, smoking cigarettes and ingesting other stimulants to keep you afloat, you will inevitably fail and hit an unwavering wall as they begin to wear off. One can only party so much and not eat before going down in a brilliant shroud of flames. Keeping that information in the back of our minds, we also managed to fill our empty stomachs, Billy now switching to vegetarian dishes after his infallible diagnosis of the phantom shellfish. This unassuming food court was our short respite, an oasis and a brief moment of sanity as we engaged in small talk and recounted the previous nights' shows. Having taken our fill of food and caffeine, ready to take on the long night that lay ahead of us, we strode back out onto Market.

Alan, who had driven to the city without a ticket to the show but was able to find one in a back alley near the hotel. One of the many shady dealings that surround the band and honestly, one of the safer items purchasable in a back ally. The seller said he would wait for him and give him the ticket if Alan was able to produce eighty dollars and a joint. Standard currency for Phish tickets. We were roused by a frantic call to the room as he explained to Billy what was needed, asking specifically for the stale old joint entombed at the bottom of his case.

We stood in the same spot that we had been the first night. I was comforted now that the group had grown to three and should I need to drag Billy's lifeless body towards the exit again I would at least have help from Alan. But, to the avail of all of those involved, there would be no dropping on this night. We watched as the four band members cranked out song after song, being able to clearly view their confounded expressions as their hands slid around the instruments. The pure, cutting treble of the guitar and the resonating bass that was amplified and piped around the inside of the building as the onlookers gleamed with delight. And we danced the same, locked-in dance that allowed only our arms to move when the gaps of space in front us were briefly exposed. We walked out of the show that night, across Grove street and into the

anarchy of the Civic Center Plaza where the madness continued on into the night as the hiss from the tanks drowned out the ruckus of the crowd.

Having an extra day to get ourselves down to Southern California, the only day of the week that we wouldn't be seeing a concert, we decided to make our way south on 101 as it slips out of the bay, down the peninsula and on through Gilroy and Salinas. Plus, we had gotten our fill of the flat-pan sadness of I-5 and figured that we could glide through the grassy, rolling hills of the Salinas Valley. Rather than commit to the interstate burn from San Francisco to LA like we had on the way north, we were headed towards Cambria, a removed seaside town off the highway nestled in the belly of a verdant strip of isolated coast. We cruised out of the city in the morning, filling up with more coffee in the lobby of the hotel as we gathered our things for the road then started out into the fading mist that was being shattered by inconsistent and unorganized sheets of sunlight.

The 101 is a different road from the commuter spine that cuts up the center of California's inland valley. Decidedly more hygienic in its vistas of isolated farm houses, swaths of wine grapes and bushy Oak trees that stood as the only enclave from the sun on the dry hillsides and valleys. Unlike the trip to the city this drive would be protracted, cutting over the wheeling, lion-colored slopes, but the thought of the interstate and competing with mad truckers as we drove had lost all of its appeal. Besides, we had nowhere to be until the following night when the next show would start at the Great Western Forum in LA at eight.

We drove southward for the first half of the day until we finally came to the outskirts of Paso Robles and the surrounding farmlands and vineyards where a modest county fair had been set up for the summer season.

“Should we stop in at the Fair,” I asked as the painted highway advertisement passed across a field of overgrown weeds and dirt mounds populated with rodents.

“We’d probably get our asses kicked.”

We still had miles to cover, intent on crossing the thin coastal strip of topography that would lead us to the skeletal and barren reaches of the central coastline. Even though the drive had been much more manageable than the scheduled burn of day one, the three nights had sucked us of energy and both of our thoughts converged on the tranquility that lie at the end of the road in Cambria. This was a town that was steeped in a nebulous, ocean haze for the majority of the year, before the wind picked up as it always did and slid the cloud cover over the pine-spotted hills like a blanket, fanning it out into rivulets of moisture dispersed by the valley heat. This pure seaside peacefulness was just what we had needed after being mired in the gray sadness that envelopes San Francisco for three days.

The exit came for highway 46, the road that would lead us over the pass and through the groves of Oaks and wind-blown grasslands, across a precipice that presented panoramic views of the cold and hostile looking Pacific, cut across with temporary white streaks of foam like millions of canvas sails flung on the half-gale. The ocean crept around the bend in the headland to the south and spilled away towards the equator, uninterrupted in scale and appearing like a frozen lake from the heights of the pass. From the altitude of the summit, the stirring and frothing was barely visible and the sea looked like an extension of black asphalt polished to a fine but subtly drifting sheen that flowed southward.

As we approached town, slipping up through the narrow valleys where the eucalyptus sprung up and hung in the air like divisions of camouflaged riflemen, small traces of humanity began to appear. Wooden houses etched into the side of the hills that had turned green from the

dampness of the sea. Oily gorse bushes sprung from the slope, thickening as they swept up to the last rise before the infinite sea.

We pulled up to the steel gate and cattle guard marking the entrance to the property spotted with orange signs of warning against trespassing – NO HUNTING OR TARGET PRACTICE, PRIVATE PROPERTY. The truck, tired from the long day of hauling under the beating sun squeaked and groaned as the tires and shocks took the iron gaps in the grate and slid onto the clay track. Pulverous dust hung in the air moving equidistant with the car as it ambled towards a collection of buildings set into a spruce filled basin. The house was unlit and eerie as we came up the drive and pulled the truck to a final halt near the back. A slender tree-lined draw ran up the hill away from the house towards the valley behind it. We entered and scattered our belongings to the floor, breathing out a collective exhale of relief as the wooden bar stools in the kitchen greeted our tired behinds. Still having a number of hours of sunlight remaining in the day and our energy partially recharged by our arrival we cut out from the house in short time to explore, intent on putting the truck Billy had bought through a few off-road trials. We headed up a damp, dirty road that led to a precipice behind the house where ocean views could be taken in from the peak and where a small lake lay hidden among stands of pockmarked and unhealthy looking trees and scatterings of shrubs.

The truck was new to Billy, who had never taken it off paved roads before so we motored up the hill, up a track that wound through the trees that closed in on us as we made our way up the rise. Within a few minutes of trekking, sloping around the trunks and branches that cut into the intended path of the road, we found that we had come to a point where snags across the road wouldn't allow us to continue. But the barbed extensions of wood wouldn't allow us to regress either, locking us in. We had gotten ourselves stuck on the hillside, watching as the sun slowly

blead nearer the ocean with each passing minute. The walk back to the house, where a chainsaw could be acquired to unlock ourselves through force would have taken a quarter of an hour at least, and judging by the melting sun we had only twenty minutes of light left.

There had been a gap in the vegetation set back from where the car now stood in front of a fallen snag. It allowed us only the narrowest of angles in which to reverse the trajectory of the truck, but hoping to avoid embarrassment and a frightful walk through the twilit trees, we flung the truck on a series of rotations, moving slightly closer to our mark with each pass but still missing the final gap that would allow us to navigate out of the bush. We thrashed the car to and fro, creating an inlet of trampled down vegetation in the process that looked like a thin streak from a crop circle in the waist high chaparral. For 45 minutes we repositioned the beast, inching closer with each pass to the final angle that would release the car which occasionally buckled under the pressure of the stumps as they ran along her flanks. The sun had not fully dipped into the sea and the light, which painted the land with a violet haze, was fleeting by the second. The land growing darker with each passing moment as the rays slipped around the earthly curvature of the Pacific. After a period of tribulation and team work – I had been outside of the truck, communicating the narrow gaps between the trees as Billy edged the truck on a multitude of forward and backwards hitches – we had released the truck from its arboreal encasing. We sheepishly headed back down the hill, now set into the oncoming night, silent amid our thoughts after the hour's long ordeal. Pushing back through the cattle grates that hung below the main entrance we headed into Cambria proper for some, by now, much needed sustenance.

We woke, still tired from San Francisco but anxious to get through the cattle grate at the entrance to the property and back onto the highway again. Cambria, being located almost

directly between San Francisco and LA, was a good place for us to spend the night but this meant that we would still have a considerable distance to go before we return to the Southland. The car creaked from its previous day's jounce as we pushed over the slotted metal beams that creaked audibly, sounding as tired as we had been, but began to hum again as we passed onto the flat asphalt of the road. It wound through glades of disheveled looking pine trees as we motored our way back to the main highway and southward to San Louis Obispo, Morrow Bay and the rest of the unpeopled swath of coastline. We stopped in for a good breakfast in Pismo Beach; the grease our friend as we sopped up runny yolks from our plate and guessed along with the rest of the occupants as a muted rerun of Jeopardy played on a small TV in the corner.

It was still early in the day but having decided to take the slower costal route to get home we knew that it would still be a prolonged drive although much less exerting than when we had made our way north four days earlier. After breakfast we headed down highway one and passed through the grassed hillsides of the central coast as we angled the truck towards Santa Barbara. We had now entered into the region of the coast the I was more familiar with, having made this drive many times before to the house in Cambria and it was a welcome sight to again be in this Mediterranean land; dry and wind-blown by the cool ocean breeze of the Pacific, the light beginning to take on the tinge of the Los Angeles smog belt. By the time we reached the north end of the Ventura sandspit, having passed into the county named after the well-known harbor town we were in the final stretch before the decent into LA county and the madness of that place.

It was getting on into the late afternoon as we passed by the pier and the California incline in Santa Monica where highway one spills into the city from the north, perfect timing for the infamous traffic that haunts the city and we were going to be mired right in the thick of it as we made our way east. Even Alan, who made drivee from Sacramento to meet us at the Forum

would be getting to the venue ahead of us despite his drive being almost double the distance of ours. Since we were only heading to Inglewood and the freeways would certainly be a muck of traffic, we pulled onto Santa Monica boulevard and tried our luck on the surface streets where again we were jammed by cars but with at least more sights to be admired. Small strip malls of Korean restaurants, salons and ubiquitous liquor stores.

After a quick stop-in in Westwood at a Mexican restaurant Billy frequented during his days at UCLA, we struggled on until finally we crossed through Hollywood and the rest of the amalgamation of LA towns, and then on past the airport into the parking lot of the Great Western Forum where we would be meeting up with the rest of the party – Alan, who was now on the other side of the lot, having entered from the backside of LA on the freeway, and Dan and Mauricio, a local LA friend who had taken his Italian buddy along with him for the upcoming shows that were slated for the weekend. After a short amount of posturing on the phone, and the cross-referencing of the numbers of each section of the lot, we all met up at our car to wonder, presumably gathering some supplies for the night in our ambled circles around the sea of cars, people and hawkers who followed the procession.

The show this night was another rocker and I was immediately revived from the post-San Francisco slump we had been trapped in from the days up north on deteriorated amounts of sleep. As with any big musical group that comes to LA, there is frequently some *LA Times* and *Variety* reporters in the crowd, oblivious to what has made Phish's music popular in the first place, who will try and make a name for themselves by scorching the band in the papers the next day for their presumed non-conformity to the status quo. But now having both fallen victim to this before, and realizing that there would be many novices in the crowd at a stop like this, the band put on one hell of a show that would have enlivened any nonbelievers. As the five of us

assembled in the pit throughout the show, having to pass a wristband back and forth a number of times to get the enact group onto the ground floor, we all realized what a good show it was and our smiles were tattooed on our faces hours after it finished. Also, all of the members of our group stayed upright for the entire show, which was a nice change from night one in San Francisco.

To round out the tour and the fifth of our shows we would have gone to in the week's run, we got out of bed at a reasonable hour, loaded the two cars and the seven people into them, and then headed south from Laguna Beach where we had spent the previous night. We made out past Oceanside and into north county San Diego until we came to our first destination in Solana Beach: a brewery and restaurant we had stopped at the previous year before the San Diego show. We had planned on trying to surf while we were there, but by now the days had been wearing on us, all melting together, and we were content to sit in the bar, chat and watch the silent surf films playing on the oversized flat screens. Even if we had the gumption to surf, the waves were flat, the light filtered through a smoggy onshore haze that had enshrouded this section of the coast. All were content in the bar however as we ate our cheese burgers and conflagrated on the last week's adventures. Billy still hadn't said anything about passing out at the show and I wasn't going to be the first one to chime in on the subject, so I had let sleeping dogs lie. His girlfriend knew after he had called her and mentioned it as we returned from the Panhandle but the three of us held on to the secret until a few weeks later.

To get to the show we would be driving inland and out towards the ceaseless desert and the border crossing at Otay Mesa, considered by some to be the most congested crossing of any international boundary. As we flowed south on the 805, we took the last exit before Mexico to the Chula Vista. Out here, among the barren hills and sadly blown dust and smells emanating

from Baja Norte, we were led to a dirt lot next to a sparsely used waterpark and concert venue where the familiar pre-show rituals had already begun. People threw disks and footballs amongst the dusty car, peddled random trinkets and drugs as they walked up and down the pale rows of automobiles baked in a dirty haze picked up by the northerly winds. We had intentions of securing a few things for the show and after we had found them we simply walked along the aisles of cars, listening to the racket that traveled over the hill from Tijuana. The venue itself was no more than a half mile from dividing stripe and we were sure that at least some Mexicans would be able to hear and enjoy the music as they waited to cross the fence that ran out to the badland hills nestled down in the east. There was also the striking difference between the two countries that can always be perceived when one is in proximity to that dramatic intersection between the two different worlds – one side of the fence, free of structures, thin grassland strips strewn about with garbage, while the other side overflowed with hovels and lean-tos abutting the no man's gap. But we had each been to Mexico many times, and knew of the other world that we were so close to and there would be another time for us to think about that. For now, we had come for only one thing: the last night of music on the epic journey that lay behind us.

The music, which was always good in my opinion but can be torn into a different stratosphere when the band is relieved of pressure on night's such as these, was even better than its usual and paranormal self. The burden that had been unfairly placed on them in San Francisco and LA – the need to blow people out of the water with their improvisation and musical spontaneity – had dissipated and they were on stage to do only what they wanted and nothing else. The crowd that delights in the tunes whenever they are played had been whittled down to only the barebones enthusiasts and diehards, whereas in the previous two engagements there had been many who were not devotees of the foursome. And the band delighted in the

casual atmosphere that they had found themselves in, on this remote escarpment of American soil, sided by the galaxy of Latin America. The songs came fast and didn't disappoint. Old and new songs alike blasted out from the speakers to the onlookers who swam in the majesty and flow of the show, taking it in like faithful disciples. It had not been expected that the best show of the run would come to fruition in front of us in San Diego, but that is what happened and each of us rejoiced in it and swam in the sound waves together.

As the last night came to a close with the energy and noise having climaxed with a song I knew and loved and wanted more of, the band remarked on the tour and the jovial times that had been shared with their crew and with the fans. They would be returning to the East Coast to get ready for the next set in a month's time – three shows in Colorado that I would be front and center for each night – but in the meantime would return home for much needed rest, as we had needed ourselves. Their fuses burned as near to the end as the fans who had been on the road for uncounted weeks. We all left the show together that night in a group, the seven of us still glowing from the night as we walked into the dusty parking lot for the drive back up the coast. In time we would find out respective cars, separate again and head off in our own directions. I would be headed back to Laguna with two friends, who would get up the next morning and dive headlong back into that sea of humanity in Los Angeles. Eventually I would board plane for the middle of the country and my flat-pan grass plain that ran out to the Rockies and setting sun behind them bathing the sky in brilliant orange and burgundy. Back to the realities of life, the feeling of emptiness that can follow fans of the band around for weeks after they had hung up their instruments for the fall. But there were many more shows ahead of me, and I knew in time I'd get right back into that zone that only the music can bring you to. But the six shows of this California run would still be tattooed on the back of my mind, the recollections always available

whether they be good or bad, fuzzy or crystal clear. And there was never any sense in dwelling on the closing of a tour for it had been a good run and there would still be plenty more of them to come in the future.